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AUTHOR Lundu, Maurice C.
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ABSTRACT

Arguing that the information needs of the rural community are largely ignored in the establishment of information systems and services, this paper: (1) identifies the unique characteristics of information users in rural areas; (2) identifies and analyzes the types of communication channels most likely to deliver the information related to agriculture, health, fishing, and forestry that is needed by this user group; and (3) suggests that ways of managing information resources to serve this type of community should be included in the formulation of a national information policy in Zambia. It is noted that the types of information resources suitable for this group, which depends largely on oral and visual aids for the communication of ideas and information exchange, are what are usually referred to in the literature as an "indigenous communication system," as opposed to an "exotic communication system," which does not operate within the channels existing in the particular society. The importance of accepting rural people's knowledge as a national resource to be utilized in national development efforts is discussed, as well as the implications of this particular issue for the formulation of national information policy. (12 references) (EW)

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SESSION THEME: INFORMATION POLICY ISSUES

TITLE OF THIS PAPER:

Information Resource Management for rural communities in Zambia : implications for national information policy formulation.

PAPER PRESENTER:

Maurice C Lundu, B.A.(UNZA)
M.S.L.S. (CWRU, Cleveland, Ohio, USA)
Ph.D. (University of Sheffield, UK)
Librarian, University of Zambia at Ndola
P O Box 21692, KITWE, Zambia.

ABSTRACT:

The paper attempts to give greater emphasis to an information user target that is mostly ignored in the establishment of information systems or services. This user group is the rural community in Zambia whose unique characteristics are identified and stressed in the text.

The types of information resources suitable for this user group are ascertained and given special treatment. The paper advocates the utilization of what is usually referred to in the literature as "Indigenous Communication System" (ICS) as opposed to the "Exotic Communication System" (ECS) in order to repackage these information resources to reach the target group.

Finally, the paper suggests just how serving this unique information user group may affect the whole process of formulating a national information policy by giving examples drawn from the document that the Zambia Library Association has just presented to the Party and its Government in Zambia.

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INTRODUCTION AND EMPHASIS

Information and communication have an increasingly pervasive influence on almost every aspect of social cohesion and human development regardless of where human beings are found : rural or urban, developed or developing environments. Consequently, it is not too surprising for any government in the world to feel obliged to pay greater attention to the beneficial effects on society that believes in the power of information and communition. As costs of information resources have escalated and expectations increased in the last few years, information professionals in Zambia are raising more and more questions about the effectiveness of some information systems being developed in the country. In fact, the current debate concentrates on the effectiveness of information systems being developed to specifically serve rural communities in developing countries like Zambia. It is chiefly for this reason that this paper will attempt to stress the problem of managing information resources for this somehow "disadvantaged" group of all information users in Zambia and perhaps elsewhere in the world.

In discussing this particular issue, I shall put emphasis on:

1. The characteristics of information users one associates with rural areas;

2. The identification and analysis of the type of communication channels most likely to deliver the information in order to satisfy rural communities' needs which are related to agriculture, health, fishing and forestry "the nature will provide" syndrome.

3. Discussing how the formulation of a national information policy in Zambia should endeavour to suggest ways of managing information resources to serve this type of user community.

I shall now deal with each of these very interrelated questions one after another in the presentation that follows.

RURAL COMMUNITIES IN ZAMBIA : THEIR CHARACTERISTICS

According to the 1980 national census, Zambia's population was 5.60 million with an an average population growth rate of 3.1 per cent. Despite the fact that Zambia boasts of a highly urbanised population (because of the mining towns situated on what is commonly referred to as the Copperbelt), nearly

57 to 60 per cent of her present population is to be found in rural areas (Lusaka. Central Statistics Office, 1984). This means that a lot of attention by policy makers must be paid to the provision of social and economic services to best serve this unique community. Or so it should be. Unfortunately, this is not the case although the government has been trying very hard since Zambia's independence in 1964 to initiate rural-oriented development programmes to enable rural communities to improve their standard of living. Even in the area of evolving some information systems that can enhance the communication and exchange of ideas among these communities, there has been no lack of initiative on the part of the government. Sadly, most attempts to improve on the traditional ways of transmitting information and ideas from one generation to another have not been so successful. I shall venture to suggest why such attempts in creating an effective information - communication system for rural communities have not succeeded so far:

Firstly, the so-called educated professionals and government agencies have miserably failed to understand that rural peasants and villagers are not as illiterate as we think they are. We assume and quite wrongly too, that because these rural peasants and village dwellers cannot read and write, they must be treated as ignorant and illiterate. But, this is only done from a very prejudiced point of view. This prejudice has been brought about by foreign culture and tradition. This foreign culture and tradition worship the transmission of knowledge through the medium of print: books, periodicals, reports, published speeches and of course formal education with emphasis on the 3 Rs - reading, writing and arithmetic. I contend that if we have to device any effective information system to serve this rather neglected target user group, we must recognise the fact that the rural community is only illiterate in a very narrow sense of the word and from an outsider's biased viewpoint. Even a Zambian national like me cannot claim with any conviction that I am not regarded as an outsider by most rural communities in my own country. This is a very sad state of affairs that needs to be strongly addressed to in our endeavour to establish information systems able to serve these rural areas in Zambia.

Secondly, Zambia occupies 752,620 Sq Km (290,586 Sq m) with almost 40 - 43 per cent of its population concentrated in urban settlements along the line-of-rail. It means that the rest of the population is

indeed scattered throughout large areas with very poor road networks for easy communication and transportation. Those experts coming from outside Zambia and even those Zambian born and bred in urban Zambia tend to take for granted what we are used to: an established network of roads connecting one community to another. We think that that is how rural communities and villages are connected. This is not the case. What one associates with rural Zambia is in fact an absence of all weather roads that can assist in the dissemination of printed information resources. This state of affairs does, therefore, compel information systems planners and professionals to look at this problem from another angle: an angle that would relate itself to the prevailing lack of proper physical communications systems.

Thirdly, in terms of communication of ideas and information exchange, rural communities in Zambia depend mostly, if not entirely, on oral and visual aids. This means that these people who cannot read and write employ the senses of seeing and hearing in promoting their own socio-economic development and personal survival. Their observation of nature throughout the ages may beat even the most observant modern scientist (Chambers: 1983). What is even more challenging to a modern information specialist is the fact that the knowledge so acquired through the faculties of seeing and hearing is easily stored in the memory of the rural dweller and ably communicated orally from one generation to another through music, dance, folklore and drama (Mtonga: 1987). This is the type of communication channels that Diana Rosenberg refers to as Indigenous Communication System (ICS) "the information-sharing channels that build a society together, changing a group of people living in the same place or sharing the same interests, into a group that shares identity and purpose. It is indeed controlled by society itself" (Rosenberg: 1984).

It is,therefore, not proper to dismiss ICS as being totally irrelevant to the evolution of an effective information system to serve these rural communities. The observation by Rosenberg that Exotic Communication System (ECS) "does not operate within the channels existing in the particular society and that this may destroy the society by substituting new channels of communication under the control of outsiders " is strongly supported by this author. It is perhaps here that importation of foreign communication media has the strongest disadvantage in developing countries. Information specialists in such countries

must endeavour to integrate ECS with ICS rather than encourage total elimination of ICS in order to satisfy the assumed needs of rural communities. We will suggest how this can be done later in this paper.

Fourthly, it has been stablished by most scholars and researchers that the major occupation of rural communities is essentially simple subsistence agriculture, fishing, forestry and hunting - a mode of production that Bell prefers to link with "preindustrial societies" which most rural areas in Zambia still are (Bell: 1980). Dependence upon nature, traditionalism and orientation towards the past dominate the thinking and methodological approach to all issues relating to socio-economic development of rural communities. Doubtless, in such a social organization, the strategic resource must inevitably be raw materials. A community dominated by this type of philosophy and occupation would certainly find it hard to utilize information resources organised by the kind of information systems one always associates with Exotic Communication System referred to earlier. It is,therefore, important to take note of this problem if we have to provide information resources that can assist rural communities to improve upon their standard of living.

Fifthly, although one has to accept that traditions, customs, beliefs and values of rural communities are not conducive to the utilization of any organised information facilities such as libraries, archives, documentation centres, etc, it is now generally agreed that rural dwellers possess high knowledge of the physical and social environment in which they live. Chambers comments:

> "Rural people's knowledge, and especially indigenous knowledge systems, have many dimensions, including linguistics, medicine, clinical psychology, botany, zoology, ethology, ecology, climate, agriculture, animal husbandry, craft skills" (Chambers: 1983, p.85).

From my own experience, this is a very valid assertion, but one that has unfortunately been totally neglected by outsiders including those describing themselves "professionally educated" from the urban centres of Zambia. If we are concerned with the proper evolution of rural societies, we must reverse our attitudes and behaviour so that we appreciate the role that rural people's knowledge can play in our search for solutions to the acquisition, storage, organisation and dissemination of information for and within rural communities. We

must be aware that rural people's knowledge exists in innumerable forms among innumerable groups of people in innumerable environments. It is this knowledge that "Anansi, that great Spider of Venerable Wisdom", wanted to collect and preserve for generations to come. Only that his method of collecting and organising this knowledge was rather too primitive compared to what we have at our disposal nowadays (Davidson: 1969).

In the next section, we briefly look at how this rural people's knowledge that exists in innumerable forms can be organised to better serve these communities and those outside these boundaries.

FORMS IN WHICH INFORMATION RESOURCES CAN BE ORGANIZED FOR RURAL USERS

My arguments are obviously in favour of including rural people's knowledge in the internationally acceptable modern scientific knowledge system to serve both the rural and urban communities in Zambia. These two knowledge systems (i.e. rural and modern) are without doubt complimentary. That is why I strongly advocate identifying forms in which these two types of knowledge systems could be acquired, organised and transmitted both within each user community and also across borders. It is in this context that I tend to agree with Pilotta who observes:

> "If we envision technology diffusion as a communication porcess taking the form of an exchange of meanings between partners in a genuine dialogue, we must suppose that both participants equally possess credentials to negotiate the particulars of possible agreement in terms of their respective frames of reference" (Pilotta: 1986).

It is indeed difficult to add any significant comment to this very penetrating observation except perhaps to add that in order to accept this notion of "eqaulity" between ICS and ECS, one has to spend a good deal of time finding out just why rural people's knowledge as a national resource is so underutilized and not yet mobilized in development enterprise in the third world (Chambers: 1983, 92).

The information profession in the Southern and Eastern region of Africa has begun to take a keen interest in this area. For example, last year in Gaborone, Botswana, at the Seventh Standing Conference of Eastern, Central and Southern African Librarians (SCECSAL VII), an attempt by information specialists in this part of Africa to examine this particular problem was made.

The Pre-Conference Workshop, partly funded by FID, had as its theme: Repackaging Scientific and Technical Information for Illiterate and/or Semi illiterate Users; whereas the main conference that followed tackled the whole question of Libraries and Literacy. The papers presented and the discussions that ensued clearly established the need for information specialists in developing countries of the region to develop information systems that would facilitate the provision and utilization of information at the lowest levels of society. It was agreed that "indigenous modes of communication" should be more fully exploited in repackaging modern information resources (Aboyade: 1986).

Below is a summary of some of the ways in which information for rural communities could be repackaged taking into consideration the traditional modes of communication media that are usually associated with the so called illiterate or semi-literate rural masses. It was generally agreed that capturing and transmitting information generated both from within and outside rural communities should be in the following communication channels:

1. VISUAL MATERIALS:

   Posters, wall charts, flannelgraph, pictures, photographs, arts and crafts, displays, artefacts, etc.

   These communication channels will more or less match the use of the sense of seeing which is particularly predominant among rural communities deemed by urban educated dwellers as well as professionals and policy-makers as "illiterate or semi-literate".

2. AUDIO-VISUAL MATERIALS:

   Slides, films, film strips, radio, television and video cassette recorders (where these can be utilised)

   These communication channels, though reminding one of modern technology, appear to match the sense of hearing that rural communities use so effectively in their interaction both with nature and among themselves.

3. INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION CHANNELS:

   Conversation group discussions, group activities such as traditional ceremonies, songs, gestures, drama, folktales, oral poetry,

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traditional festivals, comic plays, popular theatre, story-telling, etc. (Aboyade: 1986; Rosenberg: 1986; Mtonga: 1987).

Indeed these types of communication channels are what I have already described as Indigenous Communication System (ICS) as opposed to printed and non-print media mostly imposed on rural areas from outside their communities. The major problem one has to contend with is how to apply ICS in a way that will ensure the creation of permanent information systems to enable the transmission of knowledge from one generation to another! Perhaps, one answer to this problem would be the construction of "Culture Houses" which must have "a library, a museum, an oral archive, an all purpose hall, a theatre, arts, crafts and printing workshop". According to Made and Motsi, this is what is being done in Zimbabwe (Made & Motsi: 1986). It is just possible that such culture houses may prove an effective means of organising and managing information resources for rural communities for they seem to be capable of combining ICS and the Exotic Communication Systems (ECS) under one roof. Of course, the real issue would be the attitude, mentality, training and education of the professionals to manage such an information system. This, indeed, is a very complex problem that cannot be dealt with sufficiently in a presentation like this one. This may be taken up by colleagues engaged in the teaching and training information specialists.

Despite these worthwhile observations and conclusions made at the SCECSAL VII conference in Botswana last year, I have come to realize now that our approach to the issue of repackaging information for illiterate or semi literate rural communities in our region was more or less conditioned by our lack of appreciation of rural perople's knowledge. We assumed, like any other outsiders, that we knew what the rural communities lacked and what their needs were and by so doing suggested solutions on their behalf. This is a cardinal mistake, I hasten to concede, that has been made by every one endeavouring to develop rural areas. Even for information resource management, time has come for us not to treat or view rural communities as being totally hopeless and incapable of contributing positively to the solution of

their identified problems. With this point in mind, I now turn to discussing just how the formulation of a national information policy in Zambia has attempted to tackle this particular critical issue in a way that acknowledges the importance of accepting rural people's knowledge as a national resource to be utilized in national development efforts.

IMPLICATIONS FOR NATIONAL INFORMATION POLICY FORMULATION

In examining the national information policy formulation issue, the Zambia Library Association (ZLA) strongly took into consideration some of the points or factors discussed in this paper so far. In addition, this information professional body realised that information processing and management was not the exclusive domain of librarians only. It has been our resolve to work together with other professions concerned with the generation, collection, storage, management and distribution of information as a national resource. Such professions include: journalists, computer experts, publishers and booksellers, artists, dramatists, writers, etc because we are convinced that in a country like Zambia averything possible must be done to pool our resources and expertise together in order to grapple with issues relating to national development. And as we all know from our professional background and experience, information happens to provide a major input into the entire process of national development.

Furthermore, participants at the Unesco funded national seminar on national information policy for Zambia that took place in February this year contended that in terms of formulating a national information policy that oculd guide the government to provide and manage information resources for the benefit of rural communities as well. certain important factors and conditions must be present. In their view, these factors and conditions should be, inter alia, the following:

i) The acceptance that rural communities as a unique group of information users were a critical factor in the evolution of the Zambian society: and that this user group possesses knowledge that could contribute to making Zambia a great nation. In this context, the information profession in Zambia believes in the positive role that rural people's knowledge can play in p promoting what Thomas Kuhn describes as "Scientific Revolutions" (Kuhn: 1970). In this regard, the information profession in

Zambia appears to endorse Dordick's view that "Today's communications 'revolution' is not the result of the flowering of new science but of an explosion in applications of knowledge we have long possessed" (Dordick: 1987).

I believe that the major purpose of a national information policy in Zambia should by and large endeavour to bring rural people's knowledge into the current belief system among the so-called educated urban dwellers in the country. This would, perhaps ensure the application of this knowledge to solving problems affecting Zambian society as a whole.

ii) There must be strong moves to reduce the gap between rural and urban areas in terms of information provision. Also, all attempts must be made to educate and train the information specialist to try to understand the cultural, physical and social factors that might act as a barrier to prevent rural communities to accept ideas and knowledge emanating from outside their own environment. This is a user group that needs the attention of most information specialists in Zambia in order to encourage a two way communication or information flow.

iii) In order to ensure an effective information delivery system to the rural communities, there is need to repackage information produced outside and even within rural areas using forms that could be understood and appreciated by them. This point, as observed earlier, has been a major concern of information specialists both within Zambia and in neighbouring countries of the region (SCaCSAL VII, Botswana, 1986).

iv) Because of the multiplicity of languages spoken in Zambia (72 of them), this issue must be identified, examined and addressed to by all those concerned with information processing and management so that repackaging of the information is done with the needs of this target user group in mind. However, the problem of language in Zambia is so complex and sensitive that this author is really not competent enough to discuss it in greater depth. Suffice to admit that it is a very strong factor in terms of information resource management for rural communities in Zambia.

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CONCLUSION

In summary, I have to concede that not much has been said in terms of training information cadres to manage information resources for rural communities in Zambia. This is indeed a deliberate oversight because I feel that identification of the problem is in itself a way to finding a solution to it. In the document entitled: "National Information Policy for Zambia: a Draft Proposal" which was presented to the Party and its Government only on May 5, 1987, care was taken by the information profession to include all aspects of education and training that are re relevant to the effective promotion, management and dissemination of information resources for the benefit of rural communities in Zambia. We know how important it is in the transformation of societies to develop a proper mix between (a) rural people's knowledge and modern scientific knowledge and (b) Indigenous Communication Systems and Exotic Communication Systems. This is our task and one that must be taken very seriously indeed. Certainly, the formulation of a national information policy in Zambia is a beginning towards achieving a balanced national information system to serve both rural and urban communities effectively.

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